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ABSTRACT

Certain forms of literature present special comprehension difficulties for readers at all levels. Each of the genres--poetry, drama, the short story, the essay, biography, and the novel--presents special problems and difficulties to some of its readers who would find their reading more enjoyable and profitable if they understood the ways to surmount the barriers of form. Examples of some of these special problems for each form are presented and discussed briefly in this paper. (TO)

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We Weren't Born Literate: Reading the Genres*

by

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Word attack skills, choosing the main ideas, and other cognitive reading skills specific to the content areas are all legitimate concerns of the reading specialist and are well recognized as such. However, one very important aspect of reading, generally disregarded by experts, is the special set of cognitive skills necessary for reading the various genres. Few reading teachers and even fewer English teachers spend much time helping their students learn how to read poetry, drama, short stories, and novels effectively, even though we have a good deal of empirical evidence that certain forms of literature present special comprehension difficulties for readers at all levels.

Each of the genres presents special problems and difficulties to some of its readers who would find their reading more enjoyable and profitable if they understood the ways to surmount the barriers of form. Although the special skills necessary to the reading of each genre are important for all students, they are especially important for the bright student who will want to read more mature and more difficult works of literature which, of necessity, pose more complicated reading problems for their audiences.

Take, for example, poetry. There are, I submit, at least eight special reading problems associated with the form, not considering the subdivisions of the genre such as the lyric, the ballad, the

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the sonnet, etc. These eight problems are:

1. The subject matter may be highly philosophical and removed from the young person's experience.
2. The ideas are expressed in a concise, condensed, compressed fashion.
3. Ideas must often be inferred because of ellipsis, concision, or other stylistic devices.
4. Reversed word order is frequently employed by poets.
5. The poet may use unusual, archaic, or obsolete vocabulary.
6. Metaphoric language may obscure the meaning for the literal-minded reader.
7. The subject of the sentence is often separated from the verb by clauses and other constructions, as are modifiers from the words they modify.
8. The internal structure of the poem, e.g., metrical or stanzaic form, pose reading problems.

Since the methods of teaching these skills have been explored at length in an essay entitled "Reading Skills for Advanced Students: By Osmosis or By Instruction?",[1] in this article only the first problem presented by poetry will be considered. Because classic poets regularly deal with concepts which are intellectually and emotionally distant from a student's experiences, the philosophical generalizations of many poems constitute an obstruction to reading and understanding. It goes without saying that most of the time students should be reading poetry within their own experience; such contemporary poets as Eve Merriam, Richard Wilbur, Julius Lester, Robert Francis, Gwendolyn Brooks, William Stafford, and May Swenson have much to say ~~to young adults~~ young adults. which is readily understood by ~~teenagers.~~ "Fifteen" by Stafford, no doubt, mirrors

[1]Geraldine E. LaRocque, "Reading Skills for Advanced Students: By Osmosis or By Instruction?", Reading Improvement, Volume 10, Number 3, (Winter, 1973), pp. 26-29.

the feelings of more than one adolescent boy.

Fifteen

South of the Bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road and stood with that
companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky out on Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back farther in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale -
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me good man, roared away.

I stood there, fifteen.[2]

Because "Fifteen" presents a recognizable experience, it will be read by young people with a certain amount of ease; however, a difficult poem can be made readable for the novice through the use of a familiar experience that will give insight into the poet's thought. For example, although students will not have internalized the idea of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 - "that one loves even more someone who may soon be lost to death" - they will have had the experience of moving from one place to another and knowing beforehand that they will have to leave a loved person, place, or thing. Such feelings are not the same as those expressed in Sonnet 73, but they are similar enough to ease the way into the poem. Teachers can, through similar methods, help students to become aware of and practice the

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[2]William Stafford, "Fifteen," Atlantic Monthly, February, 1964.

other seven skills of reading poetry, thereby enhancing their ability to read that form.

Another genre which students find particularly challenging to read is drama. Most drama, as we have been told repeatedly, was meant to be seen on the stage and not to be read; and most of the skills needed for the successful reading of drama arise from this fact.

First of all, students need to be helped to visualize what the stage looks like and what would be happening on the stage when the words they are reading are dramatically executed. Such realia as models of stages and sets, drawings, verbal descriptions, and pictures all should be used in class as students read plays out loud in preparation for later silent reading of drama. To get in the habit of asking certain kinds of questions, students should always be asked, "What do you think Character A is doing as Character B says this?" "Where is C standing and what are his actions?" "What do you think Character A's expression is as he makes this speech?" "In what fashion does he say it?" "How do you think C is dressed?" These are questions one must ask in order to facilitate visualizing the play as it would be performed.

Students who are programmed for speed reading and consequently who are skimming easy prose or skipping what they consider to be unimportant sections of their reading will need to learn the second skill - reading stage directions carefully. Stage directions will add to their ability to visualize and their ability to illustrate what the stage would look like at any given time. Reading a play out loud in groups with one person reading the stage directions will accomplish two things: 1) the small groups will give every

student more opportunity to be directly involved in the play (although the whole class may want to discuss sections of the drama after they have been read); 2) one person's reading the stage directions makes the directions stand out and illustrates their importance.

The importance of visualization is illustrated by a master's degree student of mine who was asked to pick out one difference between the Zefferelli film production of Romeo and Juliet and Shakespeare's text. Her answer was that the beginning feud scene was very short in the text but extremely long in the movie. She obviously had not been able to visualize what would be going on during these opening speeches and had some conception of all of the speeches following hard upon one another with no action in between. So much for visualizing.

A third skill is also demonstrated by the use of reading out loud in small groups. Understanding a play is often difficult for some readers because they neglect to read the name of the person making the speech, thereby becoming confused about who does what as well as confused about characterization of individuals essential to the plot. With different people reading parts, students can be made aware of the importance of noting who is saying what to whom. Perhaps poorer readers will even have to say the character's name before the character's speech is read in order to internalize this important reading skill; for example, if, in a group, a student is reading the part of Laura in The Glass Menagerie from the scene in which her glass unicorn's horn is broken, the oral reader would say, "Laura" or "Laura says" - pause - "I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was

removed to make him feel less - freakish! Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns."

A fourth skill necessary to reading drama concerns characterization. A reader must decide what kind of person a character is mainly through speeches; he does not have the kind of analysis the author gives him or her in a novel or short story. If Character A tells Character B that Character C is a liar, then the reader must decide if Character A is trustworthy. The reader must observe all speeches and stage directions carefully to see whether or not Character A is believable or is, perhaps, a villian himself, i.e., is what Iago tells Othello about Desdemona - or hints at - true? Students will be aided in their reading just by being aware that in a play the author usually does not overtly analyze characters and that most of what one knows about a character is revealed by his or her speeches as well as by the speeches of others.

Probably the most sophisticated skill in reading drama is the ability to recognize that what the playwright wrote is not the whole of the play. How a producer interprets the entire script or how an actor portrays a single character, even within the limits of the text, could very well change emphases in a play. Also, the reader himself becomes a producer or actor and creatively interacts with the author's words.[3] To facilitate the learning of this skill, one can play several recordings of the same speech as differentially interpreted by a number of actors. Does the author interpret the Prince of Morocco in The Merchant of Venice as a blustering braggart; a deferential, truly modest man; or a kind of barbarian? How is

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[3]See Louis Rosenblatt, Literature as Exploration, revised. (New York: Noble and Noble, Publishers, Inc.), 1968.

each rendering faithful to the text and how does each elaborate on the text?

Turning to reading the short story and novel, I do not wish to spend any time reinventing the wheel by discoursing on the necessity for motivation and suitable reading level of material. I will not review the importance of guide questions on plot, setting, theme, characterization, tone, style, structure, and literary devices. Instead, I would like to discuss particular skills about which we hear little. Although many of the general skills necessary for reading the novel are also important for the short story, it is advisable to keep in mind that the short story's condensed, compressed form, like that of poetry, exacerbates comprehension difficulties just as the length of the novel presents added memory problems. The single plot, single setting, and few characters of the short story present different problems for the reader from those proffered by the multiple plots, settings, and characters of the novel.

One skill that seems to characterize good fiction readers from poor is the habit of reviewing what has happend previously in the story before one begins reading again after an interruption. If a readers stops reading on Wednesday, marks his or her place, and is not able to read again until Friday, it is wise to review what was going on in the story at the place where one stopped. What is happening? Where is it happening? Who is involved? Perhaps starting to read several pages back from where one stopped would be helpful in retaining the continuity and sequence of the plot.

Another technique for helping students establish and retain the sequence of action in a difficult or long novel might be to mark for them in advance the major changes in time or place. The teacher might say, "Note when you are reading that on such and such

a page the action switches from City A to City B and to the year 17__. See if you can find the clues that indicate that this is so." If before the students start to read, the teacher points up all such changes and asks the students to find the clues, the instructor is helping students set a pattern for looking for clues about setting changes on their own.

A second characteristic of competent readers of fiction is their ability to hypothesize about what is going to happen. Hypothesizing about fiction seems to be the equivalent of asking oneself questions about non-fiction prose. The reader hypothesizes that True Son in Conrad Richter's The Light in the Forest will be in complete sympathy with all the Indian ways of his friend Half Arrow. When the reader discovers that True Son does not wish to steal a settler's boat, as Half Arrow does, he knows that a change has occurred in True Son and that he or she, as interpreter, will have to formulate some new hypotheses about the probable outcome of the story. When readers do this, they are actively involved in what is going on and are therefore better and more creative readers, in the Emersonian sense. To aid in the development of this skill, teachers can ask students in class or individually to hypothesize about what will happen after looking at the cover of a book, after looking at the blurbs, after reading the first chapter of a novel or the first paragraphs of a short story, or after any other crucial point in a story. Imagining what happened before the story began and projecting beyond the final resolution of the story are interesting variations on the hypothesizing technique.

Although many teachers pay attention to how to use the index,

table of contents, etc., they do not demonstrate the use of a third skill in reading difficult fiction - that of using footnotes and lengthy appendices. For example, some editions of The Tale of Two Cities have appendices divided by chapters; these appendices explain historical events and other obscure references in the narrative. Reading the first chapter of a book out loud with the class with a demonstration of how to use such sections of a book is necessary. One way might be to read in class all of the notes for Chapter One; then have each student place a book mark at the beginning of the notes. The next step is to read Chapter One of the novel; when the class arrives at the first footnote for the appendix, have them try to remember the gist of it; if someone can, go on reading; if no one can remember the note's intent, then have all the students flip back to their book marks and read the note again. Such activity demonstrates an efficient process in reading, a process which can be used with many types of material.

No discussion of reading the genres would be complete without a few words about two non-fiction genres - the essay and the biography. The essay is probably the most prevalent form of writing today. Because of the frequency of its occurrence in the form of magazine and newspaper articles, editorials, critiques, columns, and analytical discussions, there are essays for everyone - written on every reading level and on every conceivable topic. Because there is little point in trying to classify the modern essay into some arbitrary and Procrustean form such as informal, formal, humorous, etc., the guide questions used for non-fiction or the SQ3R method not infrequently are successful with the kind of essays secondary students find profitable.

The reading of both so-called fictional biography and of true biography combines the skills of reading fiction and of reading non-fiction. In the case of reading novelized biography one has to be able to differentiate, at least in a gross fashion, fact from fiction. In Irving Stone's book about Michelangelo - The Agony and the Ecstasy - the reader must recognize that since there are few writings of Michelangelo's extant, Stone's conversations are fiction although the events of the artist's life are generally substantiated by records. Furthermore, the opinions Michelangelo expresses in conversations are supported by historical evidence. But even in true biography there are elements of narration and description more commonly found in fiction than in expository writing, while mature biography, as opposed to biography written especially for adolescents, often deals, like poetry, with concepts beyond the students' grasp.

Student readers can be aided in their exploration of biography through general guide questions like the following which have wide application over any number of biographies:

1. What is the author's attitude toward his/her subject? Does the author write from a particular angle? What is the angle? Is he sympathetic toward the subject?
2. What is the attitude, outlook, or philosophy of life by which the subject lived?
3. In your opinion, what is the greatest contribution the subject made to the world or to his/her associates?
4. What were some of the obstacles that the subject had to overcome during his/her life?
5. Did the book contain any ideas that you think you will find useful in making your own life a better one?
6. What do you think were the forces in the subject's life that had the most influence on him/her? Explain.

One final word about reading the genres - if you, your school district, or your state is attempting to implement performance objectives, all of these skills, although they are dealt with here in global terms, are capable of being stated in behavioral terms. One example will suffice. "If a student has read the stage directions of a play with an attempt at visualization, he will be able to draw a picture of what the stage will look like at a particular point in the action."

If we believe that the most important thing we teach young people in this age of expanding knowledge is the ability to learn more - the process of learning how to learn - how can we then doubt the importance of teaching the process of reading the various genres!!